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Urban Gangs Today - Myths and Realities

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Researchers and law enforcement officials alike often hold a highly stereotyped view of urban gangs and the meaning of gang membership. Gangs are seen as fixed organizations with clear boundaries. Joining a gang is considered an intense initiation, perhaps involving the commission of a crime to prove one's loyalty. Leaving a gang is thought to happen only rarely and be very risky, even fatal for those who try. "Blood in, blood out," is how the saying goes. But this conception of gang membership is, at best, based on older studies in cities like Los Angeles and Chicago with long-standing, well-delineated gangs. In many other places where non-traditional gang networks have developed since the 1990s, this image of gang structure and membership is more mythical than real. In America today, increased individualism and fluidity characterize gangs as much as other areas of social life and policymaking needs to take account of the new realities.

In an exploratory effort to examine contemporary gang behaviors, I completed fourteen in-depth interviews in the city of San Antonio, Texas, with former participants in various gangs called Bloods, Crips, Folks, People, and Surenos. San Antonio is a good place to look for current trends, because law enforcement agencies classify it as an "emerging gang problem city." My findings are, of course, subject to further verification by other researchers looking at additional settings. But as has been the case in some previous studies, my results suggest that many of today's American urban gangs are best understood as unstructured, fluid networks of association. From the point of view of participating individuals, gang initiations are not always required, and people often depart from gangs with no dire consequences. In San Antonio, moreover, switching gangs was a fairly common occurrence.

The Fluid Realities of Contemporary Gang Membership

Traditional ideas about gangs presume that members are always sure who is a member, and who is not. But in my interviews, gang participants showed little concern about distinguishing mere associates from actual gang members. Individual reputations were more important than membership labels in determining a person's status, and it also seemed to be the case that who was "in" depended on who was actually present during an important event. For example, during a gang fight anyone who supported their side was considered a part of the group.

- Gang members clearly indicated that initiation was not the sole determinant for inclusion in a gang. Verification of gang credentials was rejected in favor of a "with us or against us" perspective. Actions spoke louder than organizational labels.

- Many people who were considered gang members did not have to submit to any sort of violent or a criminal initiation. Having a reputation of supporting a group or being someone who had won the approval of well-respected members of a gang was enough for people to get "blessed in," without having to submit to enduring violence or committing a crime to prove their worth.

- The gang members I interviewed did not have clear ideas about who was in their own gang or how many people were members. Nor did they seem much concerned with those issues. Most gang members were part of a close-knit subgroup of four or five people and did not concern themselves with activities beyond that set of associates.

Leaving Gangs – Or Switching – Happens Often and Easily

In my interviews, I was interested to learn about how often people moved out of gangs or changed their loyalties. Would such people face threats or even violence? What I found contradicts many longstanding presumptions.

- Former gang members said that negative events could spur people to leave a gang, but they did not report that those who quit suffered violence or negative individual consequences. In fact, leaving gangs was said to be a common occurrence.

- Many gang members were said to switch gangs or belong to multiple gangs concurrently. This was more common with allied gangs, but from time to time individuals switched to rival groups. When such a switch to a rival gang occurred, the transitioning member might have to prove his worth by committing a serious criminal act. But switching to an allied group was generally accepted without issue.

- Gang-level dynamics spur shifts in affiliations. The dissolution of one gang sometimes can disperse its members into other gangs. And according to my informants, when adverse events happen, such as the death of a prominent member at the hands of a rival group, entire gangs sometimes switch their identity – for example, Crips turning into Bloods.

- Why do members leave gangs altogether? My informants pointed to life events such as the death of a family member or close friend due to gang violence, joining the military, getting sentenced to prison, or simply maturing, growing out of it.

Larger Implications

Many longstanding beliefs about gang behaviors need to be reexamined and policies must adjust. To some degree, the new gang realities bring fresh challenges. Law enforcement officials may have a more difficult time figuring out who is and is not a "member" of any given gang, and officials cannot just set out to dismantle a gang as if it were a fixed formal organization. Breaking up one group is likely to spur participants to join others. Furthermore, because gang membership is currently quite fluid, there are few barriers preventing even non-delinquent youths from joining. The initial risk is minimal; difficult initiation may not be required.

Yet there is also a bright side. The ease with which participants can leave gangs without negative consequences bodes well for all kinds of social interventions by law enforcement agencies and nonprofit and religious groups. Especially when a crisis happens, many members may be quite willing to entertain the idea of exiting altogether, moving on to more constructive activities.

Read more in Christian Bolden, "Liquid Soldiers: Fluidity and Gang Membership." *Deviant Behavior* 33, no. 3 (2012): 207-222.